

MAGONIA ETH Bulletin

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EDITORIAL

The main reason for the establishment of this modest publication was to deal with the accusation by supporters of the ETH that ufologists who favour the psychosocial hypothesis ignore those cases that provide evidence of extraordinary physical events and concentrate on those where psychological explanations seem plausible. Unfortunately, the ETH supporters often cite cases which have already been explained. They are either unaware of these explanations or they discount them because they cannot bear to see their precious evidence gradually whittled away until there is nothing left.

'PATHETIC CHEATS' - THE UFO HOAXERS

Credulous ufologists

Of course, most ufologists think they are too clever to be taken in by hoaxers. It is quite obvious to them which reports are not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately the ETH believers are so desperate for apparently good cases that they are easily taken in by obvious hoaxes, so long as they are not too much like the old-fashioned contactee stories.

The believers are particularly susceptible to cases involving alleged physical evidence. A good example is the business of the Ubatuba magnesium samples, which arrived on the desk of a Rio de Janeiro society columnist in 1957 with a note claiming that they had come from a flying saucer which had exploded in flames over a beach near Ubatuba, Sao Paulo. Some ufologists actually believed the story, but the more 'scientific' ones pointed to the fact that experts failed to establish what method had been used to manufacture the samples as evidence that they were of extraterrestrial origin. Few of them wanted to write it off as a hoax after all the time and money that had been spent on the case, especially as physical evidence is so hard to come by.

ETH enthusiasts are equally reluctant to write off the Trindade Isle photographs, despite the fact that they were taken by a man with a reputation as a trick photographer and the fact that the statements of the numerous other alleged witnesses to the sighting remain suspiciously unavailable.

Jerome Clark continues to plug the Trans en Provence UFO landing case (only one witness), despite the detailed and devastating study of the alleged landing traces conducted by Eric Maillot. Of course we all know about those awful French sceptics, who make Philip Klass look credulous in comparison!

When you wish upon a star

In his study of hoaxes and hoaxers, Nick Yapp writes:

We are often caught up in a hoax, because we leap at the opportunity that a hoaxer seems to present to us. And once we have leapt, there can be no twisting in mid-air and turning back. And the further or the higher we have leapt, the longer the hoax will run and the more helplessly we shall be enmeshed in it. We all have our weaknesses and we all have our dreams. We swallow what Jiminy Cricket tells us, that when we wish upon a star our dreams will come true. Hoaxers know this, consciously or sub-consciously. (1)

Experimental hoax

In 1970 an experiment, which demonstrated the truth of Yapp's assertions about hoax victims, was carried out in Warminster. An organisation called the Society for the Investigation of Unidentified Flying Object Phenomena (SIUFOP) devised a simple hoax with the intention of assessing the competence and objectivity of UFO investigators.

Warminster, in Wiltshire, was the location chosen for this experiment because of its high density of skywatching ufologists. The scheme was to provide those watching on Cradle Hill with a simple visual stimulus, to introduce photographic evidence inconsistent with the stimulus and to observe the effect this evidence had on subsequent investigation, recording and publicity. (2)

The experiment consisted of shining a 144 watt lamp, fitted with a purple filter, in the direction of a group of skywatchers on Cradle Hill, about three quarters of a mile away. Four SIUFOP members were among the skywatchers. One of them had a camera mounted on a tripod and pretended to take photographs when the light appeared. There was also a fake UFO detector, which had been synchronised to sound a buzzer 15 seconds after the light appeared. When the light disappeared, the photographer took two genuine photographs, which could be used for comparison purposes. The two preceding frames had been previously exposed with UFO images superimposed on the landscape as seen from Cradle Hill.

The earlier pictures had been taken from a different position and the images of the UFOs did not correspond with the light seen by the skywatchers. In these pictures two of the row of street lamps shown in them were out, but they were on in the two pictures taken just after the incident.

The next stage of the hoax was the one where it was likely to fail, or at least to arouse strong suspicions among the ufologists present. The photographer, Mr Foxwell, asked if anyone could get the film developed for him. One of those present actually agreed, without asking any awkward questions, to have it developed. It was handed to him and the pictures eventually appeared in *Flying Saucer Review*.

Genuine faked photographs

The photographs were examined by *FSR*'s 'experts' who pronounced them genuine, as they totally failed to spot any of the deliberate inconsistencies and made a number of glaring errors in their attempts to interpret them.

David Simpson and Ken Raine of SIUFOP attended a meeting of *FSR* experts in September 1970. Although they gave them some hints which would probably have enabled them to detect the inconsistencies, their suggestions were ignored and the hoax remained intact.

In *SIUFOP Newsletter* No. 19 (January 1971) David Simpson published an article about the Warminster UFO photographs entitled 'The Hoax of 1970?'. In this he criticised the investigations carried out by *FSR* consultants, giving his reasons. He also asked why no one had bothered to interview the photographer. However, *FSR* failed to take these broad hints. The only visible effect of them was a brief comment by editor Charles Bowen: 'By mid-January, 1971, news had reached me that there had been a little lightweight criticism of the Cradle Hill photographs.' (3)

Pathetic cheats

The hoax lasted for two and a half years and was ended when Mr Foxwell confided in a friend who also happened to be a friend of Carl Grove, who happened to be a contributor to *FSR*. Charles Bowen was furious and denounced the hoaxers as 'pathetic cheats'.

In his summary of the experiment Simpson wrote:

The vast amount of literature published leads one to the conclusion that the pictures were considered very significant by UFO researchers, yet despite this and their impressive list of consultants, the investigators concerned did not analyse the evidence critically. Not once did they interview Mr Foxwell, yet without his photographs the sighting would have been insignificant. Their statements and actions were often not those of people trying to understand a strange event, but those of people prepared to ignore relevant criticisms in order to support a cause. (4)

Of course, most UFO hoaxers never confess, so their not unwilling victims are kept pleasantly mystified indefinitely.

References

1. Yapp, Nick. *Hoaxers and their Victims*, Robson Books, London, 1992, 204
2. Simpson, D.I. 'Experimental UFO Hoaxing', *MUFOP* New Series 2, March 1976. (This paper is available on the *Magonia* web site. If you do not have access to it and would like a copy, write to the Editor.)
3. Bowen, Charles. 'Progress at Cradle Hill', *Flying Saucer Review*, 17, 2, March/April 1971, 11
4. Simpson, op. cit.

THE FADING ETH

There seems to be some misunderstanding about our attempts to analyse reports which are believed by some to constitute evidence in favour of the ETH. Our theory is quite simple. The null hypothesis is that not one of the available UFO reports represents a genuine sighting of an extraterrestrial spacecraft. Some reports remain unexplained because of insufficient or inaccurate data.

It is already becoming clear that, when faced with conflicting evidence or testimony about a case, ETH supporters reject or suppress evidence which indicates a mundane explanation in favour of that which points to an alien spacecraft. There is also a tendency to believe that when the sceptical explanation doesn't fit (some sceptics are rather too keen on force-fitting explanations), then one is justified in accepting the ET explanation, rather than looking for another likely solution to the problem.

The one great weakness of the ETH is the notion that it is supported simply by *failing* to find satisfactory explanations for puzzling UFO reports. This means in practice that ETH supporters are often reluctant to consider mundane explanations. Anyone who explains any of their cherished cases is simply labelled as a debunker. For example, 'serious' ETHers tend to pick out radar-visual cases as strong evidence to support their cause, because these are obviously neither hoaxes nor hallucinations. Jerome Clark thinks that the RB-47 case of 17 July 1957 is a good example. Yes, but hasn't Philip Klass, after a great deal of research, provided a detailed explanation for the incident? Hasn't Clark noticed? Of course he has. His comment is: 'Despite a convoluted reinterpretation by debunker Philip J. Klass, who speculated that a complex series of radar errors and the fortuitous appearances, consecutively, of a meteor, the star Vega, and an airliner were responsible for the event, the incident remains as puzzling today as it was in the early morning hours of July 17, 1957.' (1)

Here we have a clue to the mentality of ETH proponents. If it's explainable, then the explanation must be simple and obvious. A 'convoluted' explanation won't do, especially if it is provided by a 'debunker'.

Clark's principal, often repeated, objection to the psychosocial hypothesis (PSH) is that it is merely an exercise in 'literary criticism' as opposed to the scientific study of multi-witness reports and hard evidence by ETH ufologists. Yet, when we ask for details of those reports allegedly ignored by the literary critics and armchair ufologists, what do we get? Nothing, apart from a few very old cases, nearly all of which were satisfactorily explained years ago.

In fact, Clark doesn't like dwelling on particular cases, as they always fall apart when subjected to careful, critical examination - literary or otherwise. He prefers to rely on the cumulative effect of hundreds of reports which, if taken at face value, tend to suggest that the ETH might be a rational explanation for them. He also praises the work of Michael D. Swords who argues that the existence of space-travelling ETs is possible. I entirely agree that it is possible, but is it actual? What we need is hard evidence, not scientific speculation.

If we look at the UFO literature we can see that the few good books are written by those who favour the PSH. Some potentially good books are badly flawed and rendered practically worthless to serious students of the subject because they have had the ETH clumsily grafted on to them, simply because that's what the punters want to read. (For those who can't read too well, there are usually lots of silly sketches and the usual ludicrous fake photographs of UFOs, and even more ludicrous photographs of ETH ufologists at silly conferences.)

However, there are signs that this sort of thing is at last on the way out. The American *UFO Magazine* announces that it is 'broadening the scope of its coverage', which means, in practice, that it is gradually being changed to just another magazine which tediously rakes over the details of the *X-Files*, *Star Trek*, and other science fiction TV series and films. In Britain, similar things are happening to *Alien Encounters*, which is also devoting lots of space to SF films and computer games. British UFO magazines have always had difficulty in filling their pages, because most British ETH proponents are either semi-illiterate, or as mad as hatters, or both. The few sane and literate ones are only pretending - not very convincingly - to support the ETH in order to sell their books to the credulous hordes.

American ETH enthusiasts appear to be much better educated and more intelligent. This means that they can retail their lies, fantasies and pseudo-scientific gobbledygook more smoothly and effectively. However, I suspect that the American public are beginning to become bored with their absurd posturings and intellectual dishonesty.

With the gradual and inevitable demise of the ETH, ufology will fade into obscurity and become a subject of interest only to a handful of psychologists and folklorists.

Reference

1. Clark, Jerome. *The UFO Book: Encyclopedia of the Extraterrestrial*, Visible Ink, Detroit, 1998, 507

LETTERS

Re hoaxing and why do Walton's gang keep it going after all this time. Money plays a part - i.e. there was always the prospect of a film, a TV show and so on. Without re-reading the case, I don't know how much police involvement there was, and whether it constituted a significant waste of police time/resources.

With the passage of time persons involved in a hoax are less likely to admit to it, since the public tend to forget about the original case. Who would care that much if the MJ-12 forger were to admit it now? Also, ufology being what it is, a confession after a long lapse of time will likely not be believed (the usual 'he was forced to say this by the authorities' argument). Also, what would the other hoaxers say were one of the party to own up? Would they all defend their original position or not? Would they risk being sued for fraud (making money from the publishers, film company, etc.)?

In November 1952 six people claimed to witness a desert contact between Adamski and a man from Venus. All signed affidavits to this effect. That was 45 years ago, yet not one, to my knowledge, has ever since recanted and admitted the said event never took place. And who would care now if one did? Would Adamski diehards even believe any such admission now? I doubt it.

Christopher D. Allan, Stoke on Trent

Whatever the solution to the Travis Walton story, we should not overlook the obvious fantasy elements in it. Such as meeting the hazel-eyed, sandy-haired, dark-skinned human being who escorts him through a sort of air lock into a huge room, where they descend down a short, steep ramp. In this room is the craft in which they arrived and two or three other flying saucers, oval craft 45 ft in diameter, rather smaller than his which was 60 ft in diameter and 16 ft high (The Walton Experience, pp 121-124). This is not too different from George Adamski being led from the scout ship, down some steps into the landing bay of the mother ship. Walton has added some 1970s touches to the story and fleshed it out, but the plot is the same. George is led into a room where he meets other crew members, including women. Travis is led into a room where there is another man and a woman.

Then there is the episode just before that when Travis plays with the controls and sees the stars whizzing around.

We should not take the descriptions of what happened the night of Travis's disappearance too literally; the guys in the truck were obviously scared out of their wits and it seems like human nature to envisage them making the light ever more concrete and menacing as they talked excitedly on the way back. The scarier the light was, the more they could excuse themselves for running away and leaving poor Travis to his fate.

Travis's story, which only covers a brief period, reads like a dream, perhaps even a nightmare he had the night he got back. Perhaps he didn't wander around, but in some sort of fugue state got into a motel somewhere and holed up for a few days, till his senses returned.

If there is a solution, it probably lies in the notes made by the law enforcement authorities, reporters and others at the time, not in books written two or three years later, when the ufologists, news persons and ghost writers had woven the story into a neatish narrative.

Peter Rogerson, Manchester

Note for paranoid ufologists: This letter arrived unsealed. Although it had a first-class stamp, was correctly addressed and was postmarked 15 June, it was not delivered until 19 June.

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